

# THOMAS MORE

## THE LESSON: INTEGRITY, HONESTY, LOYALTY

*“Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works...  
show integrity, dignity, and sound speech...”*  
(Titus 2:7-8)

Thomas was born in London, England in 1478. As a young teenager, he spent two years in the household of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and considered the possibility of becoming a monk or a priest. Instead he went on to follow in his father’s footsteps by becoming a lawyer, getting married, and raising a family. In spite of his career choice, Thomas remained devout and disciplined in his faith. Throughout his life he was known for his sharp intellect, and his uncompromising integrity, honesty and loyalty.

Thomas lived during interesting – and dangerous – times. Henry VIII had become King of England in 1509, marrying his brother’s widow (Catherine) in the same year. The royal marriage produced only one surviving child (a daughter named Mary), although the couple lost six others either by miscarriage or soon after birth. The king, who was deeply concerned about producing a male heir, began to wonder how he could solve this problem.

*“Do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.”*  
(Romans 14:16)

It was 1520 when Thomas was first consulted by Henry VIII about whether there could be any grounds for claiming his marriage was “invalid” and having it “annulled” by the Pope – which would then free him to marry someone else, someone who hopefully would give him a son. Thomas’s beliefs were rooted in the teachings and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and so he gave his opinion that what the king wished for could not be justified. This did not initially create any animosity between king and subject, and for many years Thomas went on to enjoy success in his career and happiness in his home. The king even appointed him to the prestigious position of Lord High Chancellor of England in 1529.

But Henry VIII became fixated on removing England from under the authority of the Pope, and making himself head of the English Church. He was determined to set aside his wife and marry another, with or without the approval of Rome. Things became dangerous for Thomas when the king declared himself the head of the Church of England, and an oath of agreement to this was drawn up which Thomas was compelled to sign. He and some of his peers found a way to satisfy their consciences by adding to the King’s statement the caveat: “So far as the law of Christ allows” (Farmer, *Oxford*).

As the fracture with Rome widened, the political situation in England became increasingly perilous. Thomas recognized the escalating threat, resigned his position, and kept his views private. Then, while Rome was still considering the king’s annulment request (which it eventually ruled against), Henry VIII went ahead and married a new wife (Anne Boleyn), naming her queen. Thomas diplomatically declined to attend the coronation.

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”*  
(Psalm 23:4)

It was only a matter of time before the king was not content to allow Thomas a private opinion on the matter. Thomas would be considered guilty of high treason if he refused to swear new oaths which confirmed Henry VIII’s supremacy over the English Church and also affirmed the spiritual validity of his new marriage. Thomas’ conscience would not

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allow him to sign on to these statements and he was arrested. For 15 months Thomas remained imprisoned, being pressured to compromise and simply agree to these things that he did not believe to be true. He watched as others who shared his convictions were led off to be executed. In 1535 he stood trial, and after the jury declared him guilty, Thomas, who had so often chosen diplomacy and silence in the past, now defended himself with courage and clarity. He was sentenced to death, and executed by beheading five days later. With his final words, Thomas forgave his executioner, and maintained that he was still “the king’s good servant – but God’s first” (Farmer, *Oxford*).

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 2” | WIKIPEDIA.ORG, “THOMAS MORE” AND “HENRY VIII OF ENGLAND”.)

## AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Thomas that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections, *and* come back next week prepared to share a bit about your reflections and the action you took.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

*Almighty God, by whose grace and power thy Martyr Thomas was enabled to witness to the truth and to be faithful unto death: Grant that we, who now remember him before thee, may likewise so bear witness unto thee in this world, that we may receive with him the crown of glory that fadeth not away; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.* (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A MARTYR, P. 310)